

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

(Adapted from: Horn, 2012).

Content analysis is a systematic method for analysing text or stories and developing categories based on explicit rules for coding. It is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts. The technique quantifies and analyses the presence, meanings and relationships of words and concepts, then makes inferences about the messages within the source. It is a technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative analysis of any research item. A 'research item' commonly means interview transcripts or open question answers, but the technique can be used on any research output, such as:

- memos
- meetings minutes
- diary entries
- audio recording of conversations or sales delivery
- video and other digital content
- historical documents
- books
- newspapers.

Or more unusually:

- office banter
- sex talk
- overheard conversations
- mental conversations with self
- reliving commentaries
- eye-witness accounts
- dreams.

Whatever the research output, content analysis could be a suitable technique for analysis. The main advantages of the technique are that it:

- looks directly at research outputs in many different forms
- can produce both quantitative and qualitative outcomes
- can provide a consistent means of analysing longitudinal accounts
- can function on categories and relationships and thereby provide integrated analysis
- produces outputs suitable for further statistical analysis
- can be used to 'trap' information for knowledge management systems
- is regarded as a systematic and replicable technique
- can produce effective analysis of complex human interactions, using categories and relationships
- can be used for cross-case analysis using predetermined research categories.

It is not all good news because there are disadvantages to this technique in that it:

- can be extremely time-consuming
- is subject to error, particularly when relational analysis is used to attain a higher level of interpretation
- can lack a theoretical base, or end up drawing significant inferences about relationships that may not exist
- is inherently reductive (reduces the meaning), particularly when dealing with complex issues, and can end up simply counting the themes rather than exploring the meanings
- often disregards, or underplays, the context that produced the research output.

Content analysis in its full form is a two-stage process but can be used as a one-stage process if time is short or if the complexity of the two-stage process is not required.

The first step in content analysis is to select the 'units' to be analysed. It is important to realise that any given set of answers to open questions can be analysed several times using different units - the analysis will reveal different aspects depending on the unit chosen for analysis. What sorts of units are there?

- Syntactical units focus on words and word use, and the symbols of words.
- Referential units focus on people, events, objects.
- Propositional units focus on relationships such as manager-subordinate, seller-buyer, harasser-harassed.
- Thematic units are higher-order units like those we looked at above, and are abstractions from the open questions. Themes that might emerge are the past and the present, work and home, self and organisation.

The units you select to use for analysis should be closely related to your research questions. If a research question is investigating work-life balance, for example, a propositional or thematic unit of 'work-home' would be appropriate. To conduct a content analysis the open question answer is coded, or broken down into several categories, if the answer is long or contains more than one idea. The codes can be at several levels, such as word, word-sense, phrase, sentence, or theme. The coded sections are then analysed.

Analysis

(Denscombe, 2007, pp. 236-237)

Content analysis is a method which helps the researcher to analyse the content of documents. Basically, it is a method that can be used with any 'text', whether it be in the form of writing, sounds or pictures, as a way of quantifying the contents of that text. Political scientists might use it to study the transcripts of speeches, educationists to study the content of children's books, and historians to study statesmen's correspondence.

Whatever its specific application, content analysis generally follows a logical and relatively straightforward procedure.

- *Choose an appropriate sample of texts or images.* The criterion for the choice of such a sample should be quite explicit.

- *Break the text down into smaller component units.* The unit for analysis can be each and every word. Alternatively, the analysis can use complete sentences as the unit, whole paragraphs or things like headlines. It can also be based on visual images or the content of pictures.
- *Develop relevant categories for analysing the data.* The researcher needs to have a clear idea of the kinds of categories, issues and ideas that he or she is concerned with and how these might appear in the text. This might take the form of 'key words' associated with the theme. So, for example, a search for sex bias in children's stories might look for instances of boys' names and girls' names — the names being treated as indicative of the nature of the content. The researcher might also wish to code the text in terms of the kinds of names, rather than just how many times such names occur.
- *Code the units in line with the categories.* Meticulous attention to the text is needed to code all the relevant words, sentences, etc. These codes are either written on the text and subsequently referred to, or entered via a computer program specially designed for the purpose.
- *Count the frequency with which these units occur.* The first part of analysis is normally a tally of the times when various units occur.
- *Analyse the text in terms of the frequency of the units and their relationship with other units that occur in the text.* Once the units have been coded, a more sophisticated analysis is possible which links the units and attempts to explain when and why they occur in the way they do.

References

- Denscombe, M. (2007). *The good research guide* (3rd edn). London: McGraw Hill.
- Horn, R. (2012). *Researching and writing dissertations. A complete guide for business and management students* (2nd edn). London: CIPD.